

## 7X2ARA in the CQWW CW Contest 2003

Snow in the Sahara Desert

The idea of travelling to foreign countries and running the CQWW CW Contest from the other side of a big pile-up never ceases to attract me. November 2003 approached quickly and once again in I felt the urge to go somewhere. 6 weeks before the contest I read an article in CQ-DL about the Algerian Radio Amateurs and decided quite spontaneously to try becoming radio active from there.

Mustapha, DL1BDF, the DARC coordinator for Arabic speaking countries advised me to contact Afif, 7X2RO, the secretary of the Algerian Amateur Radio Association „Amateurs Radio Algériens – ARA“. His callsign was really familiar from various QSOs before, and I was very pleasantly surprised when he answered my eMails right away. After that, we even learned that we were not only born in the same year (1972) but also received our ham licenses in the same year (1987). Afif informed me that due to the good relationship between DARC and ARA, licensing was no problem and invited me to run the contest from the ARA clubstation in the center of Algiers city. The next day I switched on TV and stumbled into a very long and interesting report about Algeria. How many more happy omens did I need...?!

The preparations had to start immediately and Afif sent me an official invitation letter from ARA, which made the visa application a piece of cake. Because of the short time left and the unknown custom procedures we agreed to make this a low profile operation. So, I did not take neither a transceiver nor big antennas with me. Carrying along all the equipment and then getting stuck with it in customs seemed quite possible and I would not want to risk paying all the excess luggage fees etc, only to have my stuff sitting at the airport for 2 weeks. Of course this was not an easy decision. The antenna freak and spiderbeam manufacturer in me would have loved to carry along all kinds of aerials, but as we all know there is always next time... The ARA clubstation is equipped with a TS-570DG and a multiband vertical for 10-40m on the roof. So I only took some material for dipoles and a wire version of the „Battle Creek Special“ (trapped vertical for 40/80/160m) with me: a 12m fibreglass telescopic tower (made by VDL), a 9m fishing rod, various litz wires, small parts for lightweight coax traps, 500m enamelled copper wire for radials or dipoles, plus 3 rolls of H-155 coax cable, 35m each. Add to that some tools and some clothing and the 25kg free luggage were complete.

Unfortunately the direct flights (FFM-ALG with Air Algerie) were already booked out, so on the early morning of November 23 I had to take the long route via Paris. At 17:50h we were finally approaching Algiers and my excitement level was rising heavily. What would expect me in a few moments?

Easy answer – after the customs officer had only thrown a quick glance at my stuff I was expected by Afif and his neighbour Sharif. Ten minutes and a hearty welcome later they seated me into their car and we entered the motorway towards the city. Windows pulled down, enjoying the mild evening, listening to *RAI* (modern Algerian pop music) on the car stereo, the endless blocks of the suburbs of Algiers flying by, we headed towards the sea. I felt perfectly comfortable and at home. The road leads alongside the bay towards the center. The further we get into town, the thicker the traffic jam. It is one of the last evenings in the Fasting Month of *Ramadan*, so after sunset the streets get full of live. To me it looks like all of Algiers' citizens are out on the street or cruising along in their car.

Afif has arranged a nice little guesthouse for me, located in the old part of Algiers on *Rue Didouche Mourad*, and it is nearly 22h as we reach the place. I check into my room on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor where I have a thrilling view from above over the lively streets. Finally I switch on TV, lie down for a rest and slowly faint away into my dreams while listening to the Arabian sound from the TV and the *adhan* calls of the *muezzin* from the outside...

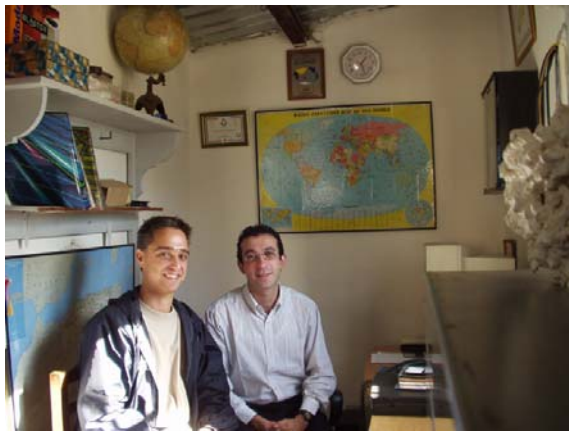
On the next morning I start exploring the neighbourhood on foot, feeling still a bit shy and cautious. Today most probably is the last day of *Ramadan* and there is a very religious spirit in the air. The rule says, *Ramadan* is over if somebody can see the moon tonight. If not, it will continue until somebody can see it during the following evenings.

Being used to cold northern European climate, I could easily just wear a T-Shirt today, but everybody else is wearing warm clothes. So instead of making a fool of myself I rather put on my jacket and sweat substantially. After a while I realize that nobody takes special notice of me. Quite to the contrary, several people start talking to me in Arabic language, only then it becomes clear that I am a foreigner. A few days later the hotel owner says I am looking like a *Kabyle*. The *Kabyle* people belong to the old ethnic group of the *Berbers* (also called Numidians or Lybians in ancient times) and most of them live in *Kabylia*, a region in Northern Algeria. The Algerian people is mostly composed of Berbers

and the Arab people, the latter of which came into the country around 1300 years ago, along with the expansion of Islam. So, undiscovered and historically in good company, my courage is rising and I stroll through the streets and alleys, visit the harbour and take a deep breath of the general atmosphere. I decide to join in this last Fasting Day, so I do not eat nor drink anything from sunrise till sunset.

During his break at noontime I meet with Afif at his house, which is quite close to the hotel. His radio shack is built on the flat roof of the house with a magnificent view over the bay of Algiers. The bay has a diameter of approx. 25km and is facing towards North. The terrain surrounding the bay is sloping upwards to nearly 400m height ASL and the city is built on it like a huge amphitheatre. The harbour itself is not very big but the ships are lined up all over the bay, waiting to take their turn. We are located in the French colonial style old part of the city which was built mostly alongside the center and western bank of the bay.

Unfortunately Afif's groundplane has been demolished some days ago by a storm so we can only play a little SWL.



DF4SA and 7X2RO in his shack



view from the terrace

Then he must go back to work and I proceed to further explore the city, although my feet are slowly starting to ache. Later on we meet again and walk down to *Square Port Said*, where the rooms of ARA are located. The Square is a lovely old busy place situated near the harbour and just below the *Kasbah*, the oldest remaining Arabian part of the city. At the clubstation we meet Hakim (7X2CB) and Faouzi (7X2FB).



ARA building (left) and opera (right)



Kasbah mountain (in the background)

We also have a short look at the roof checking the possibilities for antenna installations. Unfortunately it is not the big flat roof I expected but instead is covered with several small buildings. The edges have been turned into sloping parts and in the center there is a big plate of glass, letting the sun shine into the inner courtyard. There are several other installations besides ARA's multiband groundplane: a light 10m high lattice tower carrying a VHF vertical on top, and a lot of satellite dishes, cables and cloth

lines. There is really not much space for additional antennas; even crawling about will be quite difficult. Right now none of us comes up with a practicable idea for an 80m/160m antenna. Maybe we could string a sloper to the opera across the street? But getting on its roof will not be that easy either. Will it be possible to reach the housekeeper now, during the holidays? And how to get the wire across the street without getting it stuck in the 220V utility cable?

Oh well. I should have enough time for thinking of a solution during the following days, because soon we will learn that today really is the last day of *Ramadan*. The feeling on the streets is unique tonight. *Allah Akhbar* – the loud *adhan* calls of the *muezzins* can be heard everywhere. Most of them are probably just coming from tape-recorders and big loudspeakers but the sound and spirit is definitively there. People are surging to the *mosques*. All the shops are open too, until very late, as everybody is buying last presents or fine clothing for the celebration days. The kids will get a lot of presents tomorrow. The *AID holiday* is one of the most important holidays of the year, comparable to the Easter holiday among Christianity. For me, my first and only Fasting Day is over now, with a glass of water and some of the traditional pastries, which are sold in a lot of variations everywhere during *Ramadan*. It is already late at night when I say goodbye to 7X2RO, CB and FB. During the following days I will be on my own, because of course my ham friends will be busy celebrating with their families too.

I take my time, get up late and during the day explore other parts of the city, much to the dismay of my flat feet. I do not understand the public bus system nor do I have a city map, so I do not dare to simply take bus somewhere and see where I would land. Unfortunately all shops and nearly all cafes are closed, but there is still a lot to discover. I am especially thrilled during my walks through the *Kasbah*, which, as mentioned, is situated on the mountain directly behind *Square Port Said*. On top of the hill, approx. 300m above the city is the old Arabic/Turkish citadel. The *Kasbah* is the old Islamic village, stretched on the castle mountain; really a labyrinth of mysteriously convoluted alleys, stairways and houses built one into another.

There is a bitter pill spoiling my discoverer's pleasures. Of course I carry a compass with me and it keeps telling that this same *Kasbah Mountain* blocks radio propagation from *Square Port Said* towards North- and South America. At least I am rewarded with a spectacular view over the bay of Algiers, once I reach the citadel at the top. What a pity we cannot just set up a quick fieldday operation from up here...

Several times I also stray about in the street just above the ARA building, trying to catch a good view of the roof while contemplating a solution for the 80m/160m problem. There is a police station in this same street and I hope they do not get suspicious on me, always staring to the roof, taking pictures, making notes etc... In the end I think it should be possible to use the VDL mast with the fishing rod on top and somehow put it up alongside the existing 10m lattice tower. We do not want to climb this tower because it is quite old and only suitable for the VHF vertical, but it might help us during the installation process. I want to use the fibreglass mast as a support for the wire version of the Battle-Creek-Special in inverted L style. E.g. string about 20m of the radiator vertically, and slope the remaining wire (the "160m part") to the corner of the roof. More a vertical with "sloping topload wire" than an inverted L. Anyway, I just hope there will be enough space on the roof.

Back in the guesthouse, the whole family of the owner is there. They meet me very friendly and invite me into the salon for tea and pastries. We watch some of the *AID* celebrations on TV and communicate lovely in German, English, my little French and with our hands and feet. During all of the following days I am invited into the salon a lot and I really enjoy celebrating a little bit of the *AID* holidays with "my family".

In my room I craft together two coax traps (for 40 and 80m), as I want the vertical to perform on all three bands, 40/80/160m, like the original Battle-Creek-Special. The traps are made from RG-178 Teflon coax wound on short pieces of PVC tubing. Inside the tube the center conductor of one end is connected to sleeve of other the end. The antenna wire is connected to the remaining sleeve and center conductor.



80m Coax Trap before sealing

They are then sealed water tight with Epoxy, are suitable for maximum 500W and weigh approx 100g. I had built the same traps before in Germany, but unfortunately they looked very suspicious, like a pipe bomb, especially after sealing. Afraid I would not get aboard a single plane with them I decided to rather take the single parts with me and build them on site.

On Thursday the *A/D* holidays are over, but now the weekend begins! Friday is actually the holy day of Islam, and therefore the weekend in many Muslim countries is Thursday/Friday, not Saturday/Sunday like in our country.

Once again nearly everything is closed but today I do not mind, because at 11:00h I meet Afif, Fauzi and Hakim at the ARA building for antenna work.



Hakim...



... Afif and Fauzi on the roof

Because of the restricted space available and the endless possibilities of getting all tangled up with wires and ropes anywhere on the roof, we decide to first put up the fibreglass mast without the antenna wire, as a trial run. A breeze comes up and the mast starts shaking quite a lot, but it looks OK and we get it back down. In a moment of incautiousness we press the fishing rod against a sharp iron bar and it breaks off immediately! Luckily we manage to stick the two halves into another and repair them with a good layer of power tape. Uuh.

We attach the radiator wire to the mast and push it up again slowly. It is terribly flexible and swaying heavily. We are not enough people to hold the several guy lines. Instead we have to fix them, always leaving a little bit of slack. Now push up the mast a little bit, crawl to the attachment points and put some slack back into the guy lines, then push the mast up a bit further, etc. The whole procedure takes terribly long, as the roof is full of obstacles and we have to move very careful to avoid getting stuck somewhere or (worse) slip and fall. Of course the wind becomes stronger and as the rain showers finally arrive we definitively have to quit for today. The sloping parts of the roof are covered with a kind of aluminium foil (isolation against the heat), which gets so slippery from the rain that it is only possible to crawl on all fours. After provisionary attaching the guy lines we hurry down to the dry clubstation rooms.



Athmane (7X2SA), Mahmoud (7X2MA) & QSL manager Hami at the president's desk



Youcef (7X2HF) & YL Amel training for the license exams

As it is weekend today, there are a lot of hams coming to the clubstation. It is my pleasure to meet Mahmoud (7X2MA), the president of ARA, Hafid (7X2HS), Youcef (7X2HF), Athmane (7X2SA), SWL YL Amel, who is just preparing to take her license exams, some more young SWLs and Mr. Hami

Mohamed, the QSL-Manager of ARA. This friendly old man does not have a ham license but big fun in handling the mail service from all over the world. It is his great pleasure to contribute his part to the worldwide interchange, as he so aptly defines it himself.

There is a beamer in the office and lots of photos to see, many of them from the humanitarian mission of ARA during the big earthquake (May 2003 in Boumerdès).

I also connect the radio and do a few test runs with the GP on 10-40m. This morning we noticed that obviously most of the radials have been cut off when somebody was repairing the roof, but in the main direction (EU) the antenna still works quite OK. Tomorrow we are going to repair the radials.

Later in the evening we rent a movie off the local video store; thus, for a few hours ARA becomes our youth club with movie show, before we go to sleep.

At the next morning we meet again on the roof at 11:00h.

WX has improved somewhat, still windy but no rain. The mast still stands, albeit it looks quite crooked and it still takes us quite long until we finally manoeuvre it into position. The good news is that there is enough space for our sloping top wire (the 160m part). The thin litz wire terminates approximately 5m above the roof and we string it to the chimney at the corner with a piece of fishing line. Now it is time to lay out the radials. We are lucky to find the space for at least 6 of the 20m long ones, for 80m. (Hopefully) they should also work on 160m.

Well, lets check if they do. We connect the coax to the feedpoint and throw it down to the clubstation window. Oh no! – It gets stuck in the 220V utility line instead, but after a while we manage to pull it free again without getting fried. I do not have any measuring equipment with me so we turn the TRX down to minimum power and check the SWR on the whole frequency range. On 40m I obviously cut the wire a bit short, but 80m is fine, immediately resonant in the CW sub-band. On 160m we do not find any resonant frequency at all. We cannot measure below 1500 kHz though, as the TRX does not transmit there. I cannot really believe resonance should be that low anyway. This would be the first time a 160m antenna is too long...!? I am tempted to simply use the tuner and match the existing structure as good as possible. Afif strongly believes that the resonance is below 1500 kHz and insists that we do not give up.

My friends are having a break and go to attend the Friday prayers (*salat*) at the *mosque*, while I promise not to do anything funny nor slip off the roof, but try to solve the problem in the meantime. My first guess is the radials, as I cannot really believe those six 80m radials really work on 160m. Somehow I manage to squeeze 4 radials for 160m (40m long) onto the roof. Unfortunately that does not seem to have any influence at all, as I still cannot find any resonance. So I go up again and cut several meters off the sloping topload wire. Still nothing, and only after 2 more snips do I find a resonant point at 1600kHz. Voila! After 3 more trips to the roof, resonance comes up to 1800kHz, at a bandwidth of approx 50kHz. In the end the sloping wire is already so short that I have to carefully climb the lattice tower to reach its end. Very nice! Afif, Hakim and Faouzi have just returned and we are all very happy that they insisted in not giving up.



DF4SA & 80m/160m vertical

Fine, we are QRV from 160m – 10m. Quickly arrange the station table, PC, software, etc. and around 17:00h 7X2ARA is ready to rumble. We have some splendid pizza from the restaurant downstairs and afterwards I try to catch some hours of sleep. Ahmed, the club station guard kindly lets me use his *divan* for a while...

The contest starts. In the meantime I have put up with the handicap by the mountains towards North and South America. The signals from those directions are very weak, so chances for a score among the top five are quite small. But actually that is not important at all, as it turns out to be so much fun running the contest as the only station from 7X. Whenever I call CQ the pileups start to build. Unfortunately the noise level is quite high, not only on 40-160m but also on the high bands it is often above S9, so I have troubles hearing the weak ones. It is quite obvious that we are in the center of a big city, and also work has started again today. The worst noise comes from a sawing or grinding

machine from a house across the street. Every now and then they use it for a few minutes and I can hear the acoustic sound through the window. During that period my RX is overloaded on all bands. As long as there is propagation to Europe the pile-ups are enormous. Sometimes I have troubles keeping them disciplined. An antenna with some dB gain would surely help to rule these crowds, and of course it would also help when trying to work some multipliers myself. After sunset the bands close quickly, because of the missing propagation in western directions. Anyway, all these troubles are negligible compared to the great feeling I have while piloting the rare 7X2ARA call through the international ruckus on the bands. Somehow I feel like sitting behind the wheel of a strange racing car. I duly hope I could worthily represent ARA and also help a lot of hams to catch the 7X multiplier. I do also miss the CW-Filter of my trusted IC-735 that normally accompanies me on my expeditions. To compensate for this extra stress I reward myself with some extra hours of sleep. OK, to actually tell the truth, I simply did not hear the alarm clock, once again...

During day times I really appreciate the support by several club members, who drop by with a little snack or drink and share the excitement of the rising QSO numbers. Afif has to go to a business trip to Europe for several months on Monday after the contest. Nonetheless him, Faouzi and Hakim are at the station at night when the contest ends, salutate me "back in the real world" and we celebrate our achievements and the final score together.



During...



... and after the contest

CQ WW DX CW CONTEST 2003 - 7X2ARA Single Operator, low power, all band						
BAND	QSO	QSO PTS	PTS/QSO	ZONES	COUNTRIES	
160	111	323	2.91	5	32	
80	472	1398	2.96	10	57	
40	923	2739	2.97	23	76	
20	937	2799	2.99	21	74	
15	853	2545	2.98	21	66	
10	527	1557	2.95	20	52	
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Totals	3823	11361	2.97	100	357	=> 5,191,977

I sleep long the next morning, clear up the station and afterwards stumble through the city, still heavily tired. I would like to try and find out how I can arrange a short trip South, into the Sahara. After all, everybody keeps telling me "You have not seen Algeria if you have not seen "the Grand South" (local name for the Sahara)". There is really nothing to say against that. A few simple facts easily show how much Algeria and the Sahara belong together: the Sahara covers 85% of the Algerian territory and nearly half of the 2 million desert dwellers (the river Nile valley not counted in) live within the Algerian borders.

So, lets go there! Unfortunately I am totally off season. The travelling season will only begin a few weeks later, when many people celebrate the New Year in the desert. For a short moment I contemplate renting a car, but quickly abandon the plan again. At that moment I realize that I am not at all capable of making useful decisions, let alone plan a few days' journey. Like always after a 48h contest I am totally burnt out. The rest of the day I spend hanging around chilling in various cafés and tea houses. A wise decision, and I feel much more capable of my new pastime...

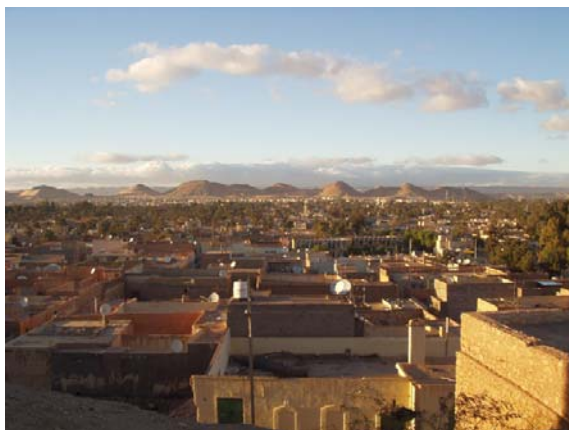
After another night well slept I am back to normal again. On that morning I find the proper bus station and catch a bus into the vicinity of Algiers. My little trip leads through the cities *Tipaza*, *Cherchell*, *Staoueli* and *Sidi Ferruch*. The area is heavily loaded with history not only because of the various ruins and tombs built by the *Carthaginians*, *Numidians*, *Romans*, *Phoenicians*, etc. *Sidi Ferruch*, which hosts a modern tourist center today, is the place where the French landed in 1830, on their way to attack Algiers city on the land route.

On the next morning I am finally ready to go South. After my little trip yesterday the wanderlust got heavier and I found the proper bus station where the overland buses depart. At 7:30h in the morning I board the bus to *Laghouat*, the first oasis 400km south of Algiers. It is raining cats and dogs, and as we start to enter the *Tell-Atlas* Mountains about 100km south of Algiers it turns into snow. Well, snow is not really what I had expected in Northern Africa but at least we are in the mountains. I feel somewhat funnier when the snow continues until only about 50km north of *Laghouat*. Nobody is going to believe this at home. Here I am in the Sahara desert and it is snowing!!

Because of the fog and the damp windows of the bus, it is difficult to see much of the outside but it looks more like pictures from Mongolia. Only the people's clothing does not quite fit into the picture. Later on I am told that snow is not such a rare occasion in this region. The mountains reach up to 1500m height and behind the mountains the Sahara starts on a kind of plateau at 1000m ASL.

After an 8h drive we arrive at *Laghouat*. For the first time in my life I am in an oasis and am deeply impressed. The faces, clothing, the way people act, everything is so much different from the big city of Algiers, which is heavily influenced from nearby Europe. I keep strolling through the streets and markets. There is an old fort on a little hill in the city center and from up there one has a great view over the oasis and the spectacular desert landscape surrounding it. I climb up the way to take some pictures. Stupid idea, because the local militia has deployed their forces in the fort. The very young guard at the doors reacts quite perplexed when he spots the photographer. I react at least as much perplexed when he comes running at me and drags me to his boss. Fortunately I have all my papers with me and after a while we all calm down and smile again.

After sunset it gets cold quickly, the stars shine marvellously from a black sky and I am lost to the magic of the oasis for good.



Laghouat and surrounding mountains



Scene at Laghouat market

The following day I catch a bus to *Ghardaia*, 200km further south. It is one of the famous 5 cities of the *Mozabites*. No snow today, but in the morning I can still see some glazed frost on the dunes while I enjoy our drive through the desert.

The *Mozabites* are considered to be fine merchants and control a substantiable part of the flow of goods between North Africa and the Sahara. They are strongly religious and have preserved their traditions very well. When walking through the old city center of *Ghardaia* it feels like time has been turned back several hundred years. *Ghardaia* is situated on a hill, an endless labyrinth of houses and

narrow alleys, with the *minaret* on top of the hill towering above everything. Once again I am really overwhelmed by the foreignness of the architecture, the colors and light, and of course the people.



Ghardaia oasis



in the bus

In the bus I made the acquaintance of Ahmed, a friendly guy approximately my age working as a butcher in *Ghardaia*. He offers to be my guide, which is not a bad idea in this labyrinth. I do not want to decline his friendly invitation for a cup of tea at his home, some kilometres outside *Ghardaia*, but I feel a little nervous. After all, nobody knows where I am. In the end I feel relieved when I am back alone on the street but also have a bad conscience for the rest of the day. After tea followed an invitation for lunch, which I declined quite brusque. How much would I have liked to accept his great hospitality! Only, I felt alone and the many warnings of several people and my own rationality forced me to leave the house and a probably offended Ahmed. Sorry, man!

It is a pity that the market in *Ghardaia* is mostly closed after my return. It seemed so full of colors and interesting things to see that I would have loved to stroll about for a while. But it is Thursday again and the weekend begins.

A bit later I take the bus back to *Laghouat* and the next morning carry on to Algiers. This time the weather is sunny as expected and I enjoy the long hours driving through the wild and always changing desert landscape. Unbelievable that this has all been covered by snow two days ago. Even in the Atlas Mountains, the green fertile grounds have reappeared again; only a little snow here and there has stayed. The travellers passing by have a big pleasure in spontaneous snowball fights or building snowmen. While watching these funny scenes it becomes really obvious to me that snow is not that common to the people in North Africa. A notice that is well received by my somewhat disoriented picture of the worlds' climate zones...

On the last day Hakim and Sofiane (7X2GX) take me with them to visit Djamal (7X2DG), one of the oldest radio amateurs in Algeria. He lives in a village directly at the sea, about 30km east of Algiers. There is a special shack in his garden and antennas, wires, towers, and parts everywhere. When he was a little boy he found his first radio in a plane that got shot down over Algiers in WW2. He took it home and hid it several years before using it the first time, and immediately infected himself with the radio virus. Later on he became a famous photographer in the young Algerian Republic. The connections established by taking pictures of nearly every important person would surely help him to carry on with his extraordinary hobby without getting in trouble all too often. Unfortunately my French was much too bad for understanding all the stories this lively old man told with the enthusiasm of a little boy.



A few months later I had to hear the very sad news that Djamal became a Silent Key.



Rest in peace, old man. I will remember our meeting in great honour.

Those 14 days in Algeria were a great experience and they were over much too soon. How much would I have liked to stay longer!

My big THANK YOU goes out to all the club members of ARA who made this adventure come true, and also to all the other friendly people I met during this trip through Algeria! CUAGN.

Shukran & Salaam.

73

Con DF4SA

**Links:**

**Website of ARA**

<http://www.chez.com/7x2ara>

**DF4SA personal homepage**

<http://www.qsl.net/df4sa>

**Spiderbeam antenna**

<http://www.spiderbeam.net>

**VE6YP Coax Trap Software**

<http://www.qsl.net/ve6yp/CoaxTrap.html>

**Algerian National Tourist Agency**

<http://www.onat-dz.com>

**Algerian Embassy Berlin**

<http://www.algerische-botschaft.de>

**Consulate / Tourist Info**

<http://www.konsulat-algerien.de>

**Air Algeria**

<http://www.airalgerie.de>

**City Map of Algiers**

<http://2ie.mpl.ird.fr/mm/alger/cartes/plansauveur/plalger.gif>